

# Sustainable Cultures – Cultures of Sustainability

## BACKGROUND PAPER 1

by

Wahu Kaara

### VISIONS OF ALTERNATIVE LIFEWORLDS

6 August 2008

#### **Introduction**

Allow me to begin by positing that that a dialogue on sustainable futures is in itself a discourse on alternatives. My thinking is informed by the fact that any outlook towards sustainability is hinged on the desire for the better. Having assumed so, it is important for us to pan through the lessons of where we are coming from to be in a position to logically construction the idea, dream or identity of the future that we envision.

As a global social justice activist and social commentator, I have been engaged in numerous processes that seek and are guided by the notion of seeking transformative change to the current way of how we order social relations. In essence, this means that there exists a set of contending forces to this undertaking.

One, the history that encompasses our past. Where we are coming from, the experiences, the challenges, the gains and the losses. It's to this that we fall on to inform our present. What we have, the obtaining reality of the day and the central pursuits of our daily engagement. It's with the hindsight of history and the experiences/exposure of the current (today) that we can seek to aspire/dream/plan for the future.

#### **The challenges of today.**

At every critical juncture of world's progress, we have always been faced with the critical question of how we construct our futures. Futures for this discussion are taken to be the recurrent theme of a continuous thought process that sets us on a forward looking gear, and alive to the fact that they are not homogenous constructs but appreciate the inherent diversity and uniqueness that is the tapestry of our civilization.

Today, the world is at a crossroads. Things seem to be fast moving towards worst case scenarios. A sense of hopelensness prevails. War, disease, hunger, conflict, impunity and outright competition seem to be tearing the fabric of a global commonwealth apart.

International law and solidarity which have been the bane of global governance continue to fail at every opportune moment. And the resounding albeit tragic outcome is that it is the common people and mainly the poor of the world who bear the ultimate burden and sacrifice.

But has the world run out of answers?

I insist that the global crisis witnessed today is a result of the crisis of the very dominant system that we ascribe to. Contemporary global political and economic architecture is founded on a perverse logic of capitalism. With its attendant neo-liberal orthodoxy, the world today is conceived and conceptualized as one big market.

With the collapse of multilateralism and the ascendancy of the United States as the global cop, serious ramifications emanate. A key pillar of this is the global takeover by multinational/transnational corporations. The governance deficit is further compounded by the emasculation of the role of the state to private capital whims. The long goal of casting the nation state as a facilitator for the onslaught of global corporate behemoths on all life facets is a recurring blueprint to conflict. Market based solutions and rigid neo-classical/neo-liberal approaches to underwriting social relations as economic variables whose end goal is profit maximization, control and domination and hegemonic designs on people and planet is certainly a recipe for an interest laden, sovereignty and self determinist conflagration. A scenario that is unfolding, and even the dominant political /economic elite with the backing of the often touted impermeable military industrial complex cannot contain.

By receding back to a parochial division of labour based on “spheres of influence” the world stands at the floodgates of Rousseau’s articulation of sixteenth century Europe, “where life is nasty, brutish and short.”

Sustainable cultures which inform the futures we envision hold dear the nexus of the environment and social relations. This is the wealth that indigenous communities and peoples across the world have continued to show exists.

Striking a balance on how we relate and utilize nature as a shared common wealth, with elaborately defined considerations of how to secure our shared commonwealth for posterity should be a life long pursuit if our futures will have to be sustainable.

But do we do it?

I have consistently argued that the greatest legacy of the defiled capitalist system is best captured by the contending identities of the Kiswahili definitions of the “Haves” and the “Have nots.” The “Walalahai” and “Walalahoi” respectively. That in a world of abounding plenty, millions die out of over-consumption and millions more out of under-consumption. And it is this logic that pervades our contemporary interaction with nature.

Trees will always be trees and so will be rivers. The only magnitudinal change occurs when we attach an economic variable to these naturally occurring resources. When we dam rivers to generate electricity to power industries to maintain our over consumption habits, we enhance ecological disasters; floods, indigenous peoples displacement, eco-genocide, pollution, etc for purposes of maintaining our lifestyles.

Resource depletion is a dominant theme of today's capitalist cycle. And in its wake, it sets motion for war and conflicts of unimaginable proportions for the sole purpose of driving the wheels of robust stock markets and financial trading.

Discounting the ability of the people to assert their sovereignty in relation to the resources abundant in their lives is not only a perversion of justice but is in itself a negation of democratic ideals and principles. A torrid demarcation of life sequences on the basis of a manipulative racialized ideology that allows a small population of the world to freely pollute, exploit and harm nature; land, water, wild and all flora and fauna to support its hedonistic lifestyles is sacrilegious at its least.

Take the example of the Niger Delta in Nigeria. Whereas Nigeria is the eighth largest supplier of oil in the world, the legacy of this wealth to the peoples of the Niger Delta is not only tears but an ecological disaster that stands at almost irreversible proportions. Anarchy reigns supreme as the competition for oil rent opens the revolving door of global corporations like Shell, a compromised national leadership, a brutal and menacing army to enforce the rape of the deltas wealth. The Ogoni people and other local communities whose only crime is to claim ancestry to a rich land are not only brutalized, but their lives are far removed from any dignity and lay no claim to any share of their communal common wealth. Any resistance is met with brutal force (the hanging of acclaimed author Ken-Saro Wiwa was an effort to beat them to submission). Any resistance and assertion from the people is criminalized with loose words like "terrorism" thrown in to justify extra judicial killings and the continuation of low intensity warfare (clearly shown by the US push for AFRICOM and the inherent hegemonic designs) to secure oil at any cost. That's why I subscribe to the thinking that the thermodynamics of production that are hinged on finite natural resource exploitation pose a critical challenge to the future of global capitalism. In the meantime, "Lets Keep the Oil in the Ground!"

### **The Need for Alternatives.**

Having resoundingly articulated that the current development model is not sustainable, it becomes critical for us to proffer solutions not only to the obtaining reality but to actually conceptualize new alternative futures.

I call this the new "Lifeworlds." Nature offers us a unique opportunity to recreate the typologies around which we order our world. Whereas we may have a lingering feeling of the dominance of the capitalist system over our life sequences, its important to note that pertinent struggles and sites of resistance to this model are not only evident across the world, in all continents, but these are continuously emerging and getting strengthened.

The World Social Forum process one site and today is not only about "Another world is possible" but actually that this world is already in the making. Robust challenges to the dominant enclosures are happening across the board. From the "maquiladoras" of México to the slums of Kibera in Nairobi and the rebuilding of shattered lives in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the energy and commitment that is challenging this decadent system is swelling both on the ground and in numbers.

But to envision new Lifeworlds, we must of essence create and recreate the cornerstones that guide our visioning;

We must of essence recreate our democratic ideals. Supporting the democratization of the peoples of the world along horizontal engagement levels and not vertical, trickle down models.

We must work for an inclusive and participatory decision making processes.

We must speak truth to power and challenge enclosures of dispossession in all manner, form or creed.

We must work for a robust and communal approach that eschews the ascendancy of the sovereignty of the people and not the sovereignty of the state.

We must develop new value systems that are life serving and not destructive to our norms, cultures and traditions.

We must comprehensively aspire to build linkages on the environment and the economy in a sustainable way.

We must push for dignity, respect and appreciation of all beings as actors in the global system.

We must democratize the access, utilization and relation to resources on the pillars of equality.

We must shun conspicuous consumption and its attendant hedonistic tendencies for it have serious repercussions on our future sustainability.

We must have need aspire to live in harmony with nature, people and planet.

We must integrate the principles of solidarity, subsidiarity and a sense of a shared common future.

Most of all, we must resist, struggle and refuse the commodification of life values, elements and the peoples of the world as mere economic variables in the market paradigm.

If we can do this and remain true to the ideals of global citizenry then we will have set in motion the building blocks to a shared sustainable future. A future that does not dehumanize people on the basis of the integration or non integration to the market power play.

WAHU KAARA

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

KENYA DEBT RELIEF NETWORK (KENDREN)

---

Sustainable Cultures – Cultures of Sustainability is a study conducted by the Coalition for Environment and Development, Finland and funded by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. For more information see

[http://www.ymparistojakehitys.fi/sustainable\\_societies.html](http://www.ymparistojakehitys.fi/sustainable_societies.html)